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AUTHOR Graves, Sherryl B.
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ABSTRACT

While it may not be possible to change the content of television, it may be possible to modify its effects on children by making them more critical viewers. The objectives of this project are threefold: to identify processes children use, or can be taught to use, to discriminate the applicability to their own lives of varieties of television content; to develop techniques parents can use to teach children these processes; and to demonstrate that children taught these processes will use them. Phase 1 of the project seeks to determine developmental trends, differences among those ascribing different degrees of credibility to television, and ethnic group differences. Phase 2 seeks to determine experimentally attitude changers and non-changers among young children. Information about critical evaluation skills of children, adolescents and adults provided by these two phases will lead to the final phase, the experimental testing of the efficacy of various critical evaluation skills. Details of Phases 1 and 2 are contained in papers by Erin M. Phelps, Judith Lemon, Aimee Dorr Leifer, Sherryl Browne Graves, and Michael Forte. (WBC)

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Overview of the Project

September 5, 1976

by

Sherryl Browne Graves

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OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Sherryl Browne Graves

New York University

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After spending an evening or Saturday morning of television viewing, if you are a child, are you the same? What information have you acquired; what actions, attitudes, and beliefs have you added to or strengthened in your repertoire? And how did you decide what television content would be applicable to your own life?

This symposium will present the results of the first two years of a research project which is designed to answer this last question. We believe it is an important question because much of what children watch is not produced with their welfare or their parents' values in mind. A plethora of commercials encourage uncritical consumption of a vast array of products. The programs which accompany the advertising present unflattering, stereotyped portrayals of women and minority group members, as well as a

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preponderance of incidents in which aggression resolves interpersonal conflict. The research indicates that children's attitudes, behavior and knowledge are influenced by this content. While there is more consumer/viewer activism regarding television for children, there is little evidence that the content of television will be altered in significant ways in the near future. In our view, while it may not be possible to change the content of television, it may be possible to modify the effects on children by making them more critical consumers of television.

From this description I do not mean to imply that we believe that there is nothing valuable to be gained from exposure to entertainment television. Neither do we advocate that only educational programming, like Sesame Street, Villa Allegre and Vegetable Soup, should be provided for children. Rather our goals are to encourage children to be willing to evaluate television content and to nurture those skills needed to be able to do so accurately.

The objectives of our project are threefold:

1. To identify the processes children use, or could be taught to use, to discriminate the applicability to their own lives of varieties of television content;
2. To develop techniques which parents could use to teach children to use the processes that are identified;
3. To demonstrate that children who have been taught these processes will use them to discriminate which television content is applicable to their lives, resulting in changes in the extent to which television content influences them.

Our work is complicated by limited understanding of how children decide which socialization agents to accept in which circumstances, of the dimensions along which television reality (and realism) are evaluated, and of common meanings of questions about reality.

White, black, Puerto Rican and chicano staff members have been trying to identify, using a variety of techniques, the skills that make children more critical consumers of television. While our main teaching focus will be on children between four and twelve, we began our efforts with adolescents and their parents for several reasons. First, we felt that by the age of thirteen, adolescents would be able to report something about how they evaluated television content in terms of its believability and applicability to their own lives. Second, we felt that there was some evidence that people become less persuasible as they mature, so an analysis of age trends in skills might provide clues to effective critical abilities. Third, the adults would provide a norm for usual full development of these skills.

We began our efforts by individually interviewing 80 black, white, and Puerto Rican thirteen- and sixteen-year-olds and their parents. The subjects in this first sample were drawn from locations in the metropolitan Boston area. We included those cities and towns in which at least two of the three ethnic groups resided. Further, we sampled within each group in a way that provided us with a range of social class groups.

All of the interviews were conducted by staff members of the same ethnic background as the subject. The interviews were tape recorded, translated from Spanish to English if necessary, and transcribed.

These semi-clinical interviews included questions on a variety of topics, such as:

1. General opinions about television;
2. Techniques for evaluating reality and applicability of television content;
3. Knowledge of the television industry; and
4. Awareness of stereotyped television portrayals of sex roles, race roles, and styles of interpersonal interaction.

The interviews were coded to get information in a variety of areas, such as:

1. Comments about television content reality and applicability which focus only on program content and which explicitly compare that content to information sources outside the program;
2. Industry knowledge;
3. General evaluation of television, and
4. Credibility ascribed to television.

A sample of 68 interviews, nearly evenly balanced by age, ethnicity and sex of the subject, was analyzed for developmental trends, for differences among those ascribing different degrees of credibility to television, and for ethnic group differences.

Using this information, the second phase of the project began. We worked with 99 black and white boys and girls in kindergarten, second, third, and sixth grades. There were no Puerto Ricans in this sample because of difficulties in Spanish-English translations and in finding a

large enough sample. Children were first tested on their attitudes in two areas -- sex roles and race roles. One week later the children were shown a previously broadcast entertainment program which displayed one of the following four attitudes: positive images of blacks (The Cay), negative images of blacks (The Jeffersons), traditional roles for women (Bob Newhart), and non-traditional roles for women (Rhoda, and an after-school special, Rookie of the Year). At the end of the program we again tested children's sex role and race role attitudes in order that attitude changers and non-changers could be identified. Finally, about a week later the children were interviewed about how they decide what is real or pretend on television.

The structure of the child interview is very similar to the adolescent and adult interview, but with simpler vocabulary and syntax and more concrete questions. The child interview covered areas such as:

1. Television viewing preferences;
2. Knowledge of the television industry;
3. Awareness of stereotyped television portrayals of sex roles, race roles, and styles of interpersonal interaction; and
4. Reality judgments and reasons for these judgments for television in general, for entertainment programs in general, for programs children said they liked to watch and for the entertainment program we showed them.

Like the adult interviews, they were individually administered by someone of the same race, tape recorded, and then transcribed. These interviews were then coded to provide information in areas such as:

1. Content for which real/pretend decisions are made;
2. Adjudged accuracy of the decisions;
3. Reasons for the decisions;
4. Industry knowledge, and
5. Ascribed credibility of television.

To date we have done preliminary analyses of a subsample of 47 children, 24 who changed their attitudes after viewing our program and 23 who did not. These two groups are matched for age, race, sex and type of television program viewed. We have looked for age changes, differences between changers and non-changers, and differences among those ascribing different degrees of credibility to television.

From these two phases we have been able to learn something about the critical evaluation skills of children, adolescents and adults. We have developmental and ethnic group analyses of what they make reality decisions about and the reasoning they use in making these decisions. We have comparisons of the critical skills displayed by people who ascribe varying levels of credibility to television. Further, we have comparisons of the critical skills displayed by children who change their attitudes after viewing an entertainment program and by children who do not change their attitudes.

The information from these four sets of comparisons led to the final phase of the project, which is in progress. We plan to design and evaluate experimental tests of the efficacy of various critical evaluation skills. That is, we will try to teach children some of the critical skills we have identified and examine the extent to which they then resist usually unintended messages of entertainment programs.

The next three papers will cover analyses of the content attended to, of the reasoning processes used to evaluate content, and of knowledge of the television industry. The fourth will focus on the critical evaluation skills we believe we have identified. The final presentation will focus on ways of teaching children to be more critical consumers of television.